

BALTIMORE SUN
8 February 1987

Miskitos claim CIA support, but their fighting is not evident

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MOCORON, Honduras — Miskito Indian rebel leaders say the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is giving them military supplies, but there is no evidence of heavy guerrilla infiltration into Nicaragua or much fighting with Sandinista troops on the sparsely populated Mosquito Coast.

Honduran military authorities here report only "sporadic encounters" of Contras and Sandinistas.

The population of Nicaraguan Indians, mainly Miskitos, in United Nations refugee camps has remained stable at about 16,000 since August. Another 7,000 live in camps run by the Friends of the Americas, a private U.S. agency.

Relief officials, anticipating stepped-up fighting in Nicaragua, braced for a rumored surge of up to 10,000 more Miskito refugees late last year. The influx never came.

Military and relief officials here acknowledge that the refugee camps are a recruiting ground for the Miskito rebel group, Kisan. They regard the Council of Elders that dominates the camps as a thinly veiled extension of Kisan.

"They view the refugee camps as the combatants' rear guard," said Col. Eric Sanchez, commander of the Honduran army's 5th Battalion near here. "The elders supply people. If they tell them to fight, they fight. Neither we nor the U.N. can do anything about it."

A relief official said: "The organization is in all the camps. Almost all the Miskitos are members, active or non-active, of the organization."

Roger Herman, a Kisan leader, said the group was getting food, uniforms and rifles for 1,500 troops directly from the CIA. He said nearly 40 Kisan guerrillas were trained in the United States as part of the Reagan administration's \$100 million aid to the Contras.

Mr. Herman maintained that 450 new recruits had joined Kisan in the past two months and that 400 fighters already were inside Nicaragua.

However, many Miskitos of fighting age were seen in Mocoron, and relief officials said they had no reports of refugees leaving the camps in unusually large numbers.

The Mosquito Coast is an undeveloped area of Honduras and Nicaragua divided by the Coco River. It is inhabited mainly by the fiercely independent Miskitos who share the same language and customs. Its swampy plains are dotted by dirt airstrips and crossed by rivers, but no roads link the area to the heavily populated Pacific Coast of Central America.

The Miskito influx began in 1982 after the Sandinistas undertook to resettle Indians along the Coco River farther away from the border. By late that year 12,000 Miskito refugees were camped at Mocoron. In 1984 Honduras allowed the United Nations to set up camps for the Miskitos throughout the Honduran Mosquito Coast.

The Nicaraguan Mosquito Coast is regarded as potentially important in the five-year-old Contra war. The Sandinistas are less popular there than perhaps anywhere else in Nicaragua.

A guerrilla force could tie up thousands of Sandinista troops in the vast swamps and forests. It is also the most likely place for the rebels to try eventually to hold territory and form a provisional government.

U.S. and Honduran troops have held frequent maneuvers on the Mosquito Coast since 1983. U.S. Army engineers built a 4,900-foot airstrip at Mocoron last year. It is capable of receiving C-130 U.S. cargo planes.

During a visit, explosions at the 5th Battalion could be heard in Mocoron, five miles away. A Special Forces team from Fort Bragg, N.C., was instructing Honduran troops in demolitions.

Militating against the Mosquito Coast's becoming a key battleground is its distance from Nicaragua's biggest cities; the Miskitos' traditional distrust of Spanish-speaking "Ladinos," whether they be Sandinistas or Contras, and a history of infighting within the Miskito leadership.

One source familiar with rebel activities said Kisan may be slow to fight for fear of leaving the Honduran camps unprotected against Miskitos still loyal to Steadman Fagth, an ousted guerrilla leader who now lives in Miami.

Other sources said the "Ladino" Contras fear that aiding Kisan too generously might backfire and create a dangerous enemy on the Mosquito Coast. The Miskitos seek to be left alone by "Ladinos," no matter who is in power.

The politically charged atmosphere at the Miskito refugee camps poses problems both for the Honduran military and international relief officials.

Honduras does not want to acknowledge that there are Kisan bases on the Mosquito Coast. Nicaragua has accused Honduras in the World Court of sheltering the Contras, and evidence of direct support for the rebels could be damaging.

Honduran soldiers man roadblocks designed to keep unwanted visitors from straying near Kisan's main base.

Colonel Sanchez, who as battalion commander is the most powerful authority on the Mosquito Coast, followed the Honduran line of denying any official knowledge of Kisan's presence.

"There's almost no Kisan left. The war's over there [in Nicaragua], not here. It's a one-way trip," he said.

"You can't tell them not to fight against their government," he added. "If conditions in Nicaragua are so bad, it makes sense for them to go there and create an internal front [against the Sandinistas]."

The Honduran army allows the Miskito refugees considerable freedom of movement. However, the army closely guards Salvadoran refugee camps in southwestern Honduras. Officials have accused the refugees of aiding leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

Relief officials feel the Miskitos sometimes use their aid for political purposes, but they say they are obligated to help the refugees.

The most blatant example of the link between Kisan and the refugees was the exodus of more than 7,000

Miskitos from Nicaragua last April after fighting along the Coco River. The refugee influx was orchestrated by Kisan and the Council of Elders, relief officials say.

"There was not one person wounded or killed that we know of. Personally, I think it was a strange war," one relief official said.

The Council of Elders has taught the Miskitos to demand U.N. help, relief workers said. They fear that some rations end up in Kisan's hands or are sold to raise money for the rebels.